

JESUS' CONTACT WITH THE ESSENES

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ONE of the surprising things to the student of Palestinian life in the time of Jesus is that there is nowhere in the New Testament direct mention of a party or sect of Jews known as Essenes.¹ The Pharisees and the Sadducees are often alluded to but the Essenes are not mentioned. Josephus alludes to them several times and dwells at length upon their distinctive characteristics, manner of life, and thought, giving as much space to them as to the Sadducees and revealing quite as much interest in them, which is explained in part by his statement that he spent in his youth some considerable time among them. Though flourishing for nearly four hundred years, from 200 B. C., to about 200 A. D., it seems that the Essenes cut no figure politically, while the Sadducees who were on friendly terms with the Roman authorities in control of Palestine and the Pharisees who as strict legalists had great prestige and influence among the people had to be reckoned with. Those in control could not afford to ignore them; while the Essenes who were ascetics and who because they were stood somewhat apart from the larger currents of life might safely be ignored. Then, too, while many of the adherents of the Essenes got about as apostles of their sect and others of the brotherhood lived here and there in the land in certain cities the majority of them seem to have had for their seat, or home, a barren region near the Dead Sea.

The Essenes rejected pleasure as an evil; and as they feared woman, if indeed they did not have an unmitigated abhorrence of her as a temptress, they esteemed continence and the conquest of

¹ The author of this paper is well aware that a number of scholars, first and last during several hundred years, have referred to the possible contact of John the Baptist and Jesus with the Essenes and that usually they have dismissed the thought as unwarranted. He, however, believes the time has come, owing to present-day critical mastery of the text of the gospels, for a more searching and fearless study of the question.

the passions to be a virtue. Hence, they forbade marriage and increased the number of their adherents by bringing up the children they adopted and by winning adults through their propaganda. They despised riches and did not allow their individual members to hold property. What little they possessed was held in common. Their relations to one another were most friendly and in consequence they were eager to serve one another. Such service was all the service they recognized as they had neither slaves nor paid servitors. While they hated evil-doers they were not hostile to society. They esteemed, and even assisted, those whom they deemed righteous though they were not of their brotherhood, and they manifested fidelity to all in authority. Their members were required to treat the unfortunate mercifully, to assist the poor and never turn the needy away unfed and unclothed, though they themselves lived most simply. Until they were worn out they were not allowed a change of garments; yet they kept themselves clean through daily ceremonial ablutions. Oil, i. e., the native olive oil, so commonly used in the East to soften the skin and keep it from parching or cracking in their dry climate, they detested as unclean and consequently forbade its use while the sweat of labor they esteemed. In their retreats none was excused from labor unless sick. Each was made to exercise himself in the art in which he was most skilled. Those journeying about Palestine were permitted to carry nothing save the clothes upon their person. Upon charity or upon the members of their brotherhood, found in every city where some one was appointed to receive and provide for strangers, they must depend.

The Essenes had a great repugnance to oaths and forbade them, esteeming the word of a member of their brotherhood honestly and frankly spoken enough. Blasphemy was to them a criminal offense and was never tolerated or allowed to go unpunished. They offered no sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem; but did offer them occasionally at their retreats. Exercising justice toward all and manifesting piety toward God they were widely esteemed as ascetics who were thoughtful, kind, and unfanatical. Accustomed to rise with the dawn and to spend the opening hour of day in prayer they seem to have been able to carry with them through its hours something of the influence of its season of devotion. They believed in miracles; and in their belief and that of their friends personally wrought them. Faith in immortality was with them a fundamental tenet, though their simple manner of life and their freedom from carking care and worry proved wondrously conducive to longevity.

The fact that though such a sect of Judaism was in existence during the opening years of the Christian era it received no explicit mention in the gospel narratives, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, and the epistles leads us to inquire first, if Jesus was in no way opposed by them? If he was not this might explain the failure to name them. Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees in their personal attitude toward him and in their manner of life and their thought opposed him. It was impossible for them to fellowship him; and at the same time it was equally impossible for him to overcome his repugnance to them. Hence his frequent criticisms and denunciations. Not so, it would seem, was it in the case of the Essenes. If there was contact, and how could it have been otherwise? It was not hostile contact. He could not have crossed them and they could not have offended him. So in the second place we are moved to ask if their influence was not after all most potently felt by Jesus, if, in other words, his teachings and labors were not in many ways so thoroughly in accord with Essenism as to be generally so understood and consequently to occasion no remark other than those which have to do with his early contact with John the Baptist and his frequent friendly allusions to him? Or, it may be there was conscious effort to avoid, if not to suppress, direct mention. The new faith, as it began to make its influence potently felt two or three decades after Jesus' death and converts began greatly to increase and the earlier gospel narratives took literary form, was seen to be so much bigger and finer a thing than Essenism that those in control as leaders may have feared that they would compromise it by alluding to what after all was but one of several sources from which its Founder drew his truth and inspiration. However, we may be sure that if Jesus came under Essene influence and was profoundly stirred thereby before he began his wonderful year in Galilee, his life and teaching thereafter would reveal in many ways and upon numerous occasions that influence. It behooves us therefore with this thought in mind to examine carefully the data which the Synoptic Gospels furnish us.

We begin by noticing that Jesus' attitude toward wealth and property appears in the main to have been in accord with the Essene disparagement or contempt of property. It certainly can hardly be considered as revealing Old Testament influence because the Hebrews prior to the time of Jesus very generally regarded the possession of wealth as evidence of the favor of their God. This is so even in the late prophetic writings which were friendly to those comfortably circumstanced, especially if they remembered Israel's poor,

and which at the same time set forth imaginatively the new day as a time of wondrous economic felicity.

Here in our study of the early gospel narratives we note that the Gospel of Luke should be quoted cautiously because of the writer's Ebionitic sympathies. Nevertheless the woe pronounced by Jesus, according to this narrative, against the rich (vi. 24) can hardly be rejected. And its parable of the rich husbandman, known to us by Jesus' characterization as the "Rich Fool" who had much goods laid up for many years (xii. 16ff.), may be retained, as in the main it does not go beyond Matth. vi. 20f., of which it might be considered an expansion. The hoarding of grain or other property in the thought of Jesus, it would seem, was detestable. We might cite here the fact that in Luke the parable of the sower represents Jesus as mentioning riches along with the cares and pleasures of a wordly life as hostile to fruitfulness were it not that Mark (iv. 19) makes him allude here to "the deceitfulness of riches." Nevertheless while the injunction: "Give to every man that asketh of you" (vi. 30) finds place in Matthew, the close of the exhortation here in Luke is stronger: "And of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again"; and while in Matthew vi. 19, we have "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth where moth and rust corrupt and where thieves break through and steal," we do have in Luke xii. 33: "Sell that ye have and give alms," which finds no place in the other synoptists. And surely we cannot with over much confidence quote the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, found only in Luke. However, it is in Luke only (ch. xix) that we have the narrative of Zachaeus who wins Jesus' approval though he promises to give but half of his goods to the poor. The story of the rich ruler who came to him and went away sorrowful after his interview because he could not accede to the Master's advice that he give all of which he was possessed away is common to Matthew and Mark. It is the more significant as revealing Essene influence because it is followed by Jesus' reflection on the great difficulty the rich have of winning membership in the Kingdom of God and by his hyperbolical illustration of the camel and the needle's eye which unmistakably brings the narrative into accord with the Essene attitude toward property.²

Closely connected with this disesteem of property was Jesus' simplification of life and his disposition to reduce it to its lowest terms economically which savored of Essenism. Like the Essenes Jesus got about with his few-trusted disciples, or sent them forth, depending upon charity or the entertainment of members of their new brotherhood in whatever city or village they entered. It, how-

ever, was contrary to the custom of the Essenes to be accompanied in their evangelistic tours by women whose circumstances permitted them to minister unto them as Jesus and his disciples were said to have been favored in Galilee. In his instructions to his disciples, as he sent them forth on their tours, Jesus cautioned them against providing amply for their maintenance. Without money in their purses and without food in their wallets and with but one outer garment which after the custom of the poor must serve them as a cloak by day and a blanket by night they were to go forth and to throw themselves upon the charity of those among whom they labored (Mark vi. 7f.).

Jesus himself upon certain occasions, which presumably may be taken as characteristic of him, seems to have revealed in his own person a real Essene indifference to bodily comforts, especially to rest and food, that cannot be wholly explained by dwelling upon his absorption in his work. Even in rising a great while before day-break and going forth for solitary prayer he consciously or unconsciously followed Essene custom.

Jesus was far from sharing with the Essenes either their fear of or their contempt for woman; nor was he as hostile as they to family life, despite his friendliness to celibacy. Though too much has been made of the supposed home life in Bethany and Jesus' reported connection therewith, allusions to which appear only in the late and unreliable Fourth Gospel,² he seems to have been friendly to the family as an institution. He spoke feelingly of marriage and revealed a real appreciation of what true wedded life meant to the contracting parties. Nevertheless, he seems to have felt if a man could continently refrain from marriage he would the more surely and happily advance the Kingdom of God (Matth. xix. 10ff.).

Though we reject the narratives of the nature miracles of Jesus we must admit that the synoptic narratives are largely shorn of their significance if we do not allow for unusual power on the part of Jesus over certain bodily distempers and if we do not admit that he took himself seriously as one possessed of such power. Here again we find one whose attitude towards the sick and the mentally disturbed was essentially that of the Essenes. Then the Essenes had a great repugnance to oil; and Jesus revealed, so far as we know,

² We, however, should protest most vehemently against asserting Jesus to have been as hostile to money and the moderate accumulation of wealth as Papini in his recent study of the life and teaching of Jesus represents him to have been. Had Papini left his anarchistic thought behind in joining the Church of Rome he might have proved a happier interpreter of Jesus' thought.

no disposition to use it upon his person or upon the sick, though his disciples when they went forth on their tours are said to have anointed the sick therewith. So far as we can discover, Jesus was no more inclined personally to offer sacrifices at the temple than were the Essenes. Certainly there is no record of such sacrifices on his part, and a passage found only in Matthew (xii. 7) disparages such offerings. In accord with one of the prophets (Matth. ix. 13) he placed mercy above sacrifice as most pleasing to God. While another passage, found only in Mark, puts love above all burnt offerings (xiii. 33). It may be very frankly admitted that this reveals sympathy with the prophetic thought. While this may be true we cannot overlook the fact that Jesus just here was in accord with the Essenes.

Jesus' exhortation against swearing and his assertion that simple emphatic statements were enough is thoroughly in harmony with the Essenes' thought and practice. He seems to have regarded oaths with the same repugnance. So, too, were his exhortations to just dealings and the merciful treatment of the unfortunate, the emphasis which he placed upon righteousness as a prime requisite of life and his frank allusions to the rewards of well-doing in accord with Essene thought. And finally we note that while our first three gospels represent Jesus as saying little about life beyond the grave we should have no question but that he shared the Essene belief in immortality; for the little he is quoted as saying is very suggestive.

To us of today it is difficult to see how John the Baptist could by his preaching have done much to prepare the way for Jesus of Nazareth; but it must be evident to him who profoundly studies the gospel narratives that the writers wished to convey the thought that John made a deep impression upon him. To the very end of his ministry Jesus seems to have alluded to him as one who was ever upon his mind; and his words concerning him upon certain occasions revealed a real appreciation of his person and work. To him he was not a reed shaken by the wind; nor was he a mere prophet. He was a stable personage with a real message for his time, one more unique and greater than a prophet, the most notable man that up to his time had been born of a woman. It would seem from the way he met John's disciples when they were sent to pass upon his work that Jesus

³ It is significant that Mary and Martha find no mention in the Synoptic narratives save in Luke-x, 39ff., in the story of Jesus Perea ministry, and that Lazarus, the supposed brother has no place in authentic gospel story. Presumably there was no warrant for locating the family in Bethany and representing Jesus as on friendly terms therewith.

revealed that he wished to stand well in the opinion of John. Then, too, in his final clash of mind with the Jewish rulers Jesus drove them into a corner by his question concerning the baptism of John, whether it was sponsored by heaven or by man. The very question revealed on Jesus' part belief in its divine validity.

In view of the many apparent traces of Essene influence upon the life and thought of Jesus we are led to inquire if the story of his contact with John and his expressed sympathy upon different occasions do not in a manner thoroughly characteristic of the time reveal on his part such an interest in the Essenes as to warrant us in concluding that he spent some time among them and in doing so came to sympathize with their thought and manner of life. If John was, as Doctor Kohler in his *Jewish Theology* (p. 433) asserts "a popular Essene saint," as apparently he was, the story of Jesus' contact with him and the narrative of the temptation which closely follows may be taken as revealing such knowledge of the Essenes as came from living among them for a time and the psychological experience which for such as he naturally followed such contact. A John he may have seen and heard and the fact that he had seen and heard him and had in so doing come under his influence may have overshadowed in the thought of his followers, if indeed it did not in his own thought, his contact with other Essenes. Off up in Nazareth, Jesus may have become fairly well acquainted with Essene thought and manner of life; but such as he must have wished to study the movement at its center. Hence, like Josephus, near his time, when the trend of events specially favored the movement, Jesus may have spent considerable time among them.

We know next to nothing concerning John beyond the simple facts that have to do with his life and work as an ascetic; for we must reject whatever the Fourth Gospel has that is not taken from the Synoptic Gospels. Even the words which the writer puts in the mouth of John as he speaks of Jesus are manifestly open to suspicion, cast as they are in the same molds as those elsewhere used by the author. They have the same Neo-Platonic characteristics and consequently are far removed from the direct and forceful style which the other gospel narratives represent him as using. Also as purely legendary we must reject the narratives with which Luke dwells upon his birth. Shorn of all this and some of the doubtful statements found in the later narratives of his ministry we are left with not only no trace of blood relationship to Jesus but also with no

known antecedents, an ascetic, presumably of Jewish rather than of Galilean origin, who heroically played his part until finally he came into conflict with Herod Antipas and brought his career to a tragic close.

We may greatly err who suppose that Jesus on some fair morning laid aside for good his coarse carpenter's tunic and going down to the Jordan, after a hasty interview with John during which he was baptized by him, and a month or more thereafter of serious self-searching rushed back north and began that glorious year of ministry in Galilee that somehow has deeply impressed the heart of the world; for presumably there had been years of strenuous preparation, a long period of intellectual ferment and gestation during which the carpenter's bench may have seen little of him, especially as there were brothers near his own age to bear a part in the maintenance of the family, ere he brought to birth those fundamental concepts over which later there was on his part no wavering. Having had these years of preparation as one who had come to know something of the Essenes and who wished to know more, we may believe he visited them, and as he lived among them and became thoroughly conversant with their thought and manner of life, though because he was not initiated he came to know nothing of the speculative side of their lives which would have had no appeal for such as he, was profoundly stirred. It certainly is worthy of note that the one thing which the narrative of the temptation sets forth is that that struggle taught the Nazarene to ignore self, to take the narrow path of poverty and of lowly service with no thought of self-aggrandizement and self-exaltation if he was to make his life count for something worth while as a servant of his people. He was not, as this struggle made evident to him, to become a learned rabbi expounding the law to the cultured few or to those spiritually susceptible, but one whose evangel was for the lowly and whose ministry of mercy was to be for the poor and unfortunate in the real Essene fashion. Nevertheless his message, as he must have seen, was to have a note of hope and of confidence unknown to those ascetics and was withal to be possessed of a loftier conception of the meaning of the new brotherhood that was to usher in an earthly Kingdom of God. After the death of John, if not before, Jesus must have seen that he had evolved ideally if not actually a greater fellowship than that of the Essenes, membership in which lifted the individual far above the Essene brotherhood. On the physical plane he did not get far from these teachers, nor did he in his conception

of life and character; but he proclaimed and incited to a fellowship, membership in which was to be infinitely more worth while; and if he revealed sympathy toward the Essene-exaltation of continence he nevertheless was to leave his church the family and so was to open up the way to all those mutual services and rich satisfactions which belong to the ideal family life of the Christian centuries. The conquest of the world by the Essenes, as Jesus must have seen, would mean the ultimate extinction of it; while the conquest of the world by his evangel would mean the salvation and exaltation of society.